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SUBJECT: KOZULIN MEETS WITH AMBASSADOR, SEEKS U.S. SUPPORT

Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

REF: Minsk 223

**¶1.** (C) Summary: In his March 14 meeting with Ambassador, opposition presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin presented pictures and names of security service officers who beat him on March 2 (reftel), and noted a letter of appreciation to Secretary Rice and his plea to Russian President Vladimir Putin to stop supporting Lukashenko. Kozulin stated he was acceptable to Russia (unlike 10+ Coalition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich) because he could bring democracy to Belarus and improve relations with the EU while maintaining Russia's interests. But Kozulin opined that the only way to garner Russia's support would be for the U.S. and EU to publicly support him as a candidate. According to Kozulin, he and Milinkevich agreed to continue with their own campaigns, but to increase cooperation. Both teams plan to gather supporters at polling stations throughout Minsk and march to Minsk's center. Kozulin predicted that the GOB will provoke the crowds in order to violently disperse demonstrations. The Ambassador took the opportunity again to reiterate the need to avoid violence. Kozulin asked the U.S. to collaborate with the EU and Russia to issue a statement before the elections condemning Lukashenko and his tactics. End Summary.

#### Kozulin Identifies Security Force Attackers

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**¶2.** (C) On March 14, Ambassador met with former Belarusian State University (BSU) rector and opposition presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin at the latter's request. Kozulin presented Ambassador the March 9 issue of the independent newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda (KP) that contained photos of his March 2 beating at the hands of security services (ref A). Kozulin and his supporters identified the security service officers depicted in the photos and gave Ambassador their names, noting that several of them were former kick boxers (names and further information in septel). Kozulin said that following the KP article, the GOB pressured the Moscow editor to tell the Minsk-based editors to stop printing such information. In a March 15 meeting, Kozulin campaign member Oleg Volchek told Poloff that Belarus' Special Forces unit SOBR had been making physical threats to one of the paper's editors (septel).

**¶3.** (C) According to Kozulin, security forces planned the beating so as to humiliate him in front of his voters. He claimed that security service officers were waiting for him inside the Palace of Railroad Workers and, once he arrived, locked him and his supporters in. Kozulin has asked the Prosecutor General's Office to investigate the incident.

At the time of his meeting with Ambassador, Kozulin had no visible bruises or cuts on his face.

Kozulin is Russia's Man

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¶ 14. (C) Kozulin passed Ambassador a list of journalists who attended his March 14 press conference in Moscow and an informational CD of his campaign and March 2 beating. He gave Ambassador a copy of a written appeal to Russian President Vladimir Putin that Kozulin announced at the press conference, calling on Putin to support Kozulin and stop supporting President Lukashenko. Kozulin told Ambassador that Russia accepts him and not 10+ Coalition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich and would only stop supporting Lukashenko if the U.S. and EU could convince Russia that they support Kozulin. According to Kozulin, Russia recognizes Lukashenko's schizophrenic behavior and at times worries that they will not be able to control him. Kozulin, meanwhile, is highly educated, "predictable," and able to simultaneously preserve Russia's interests and work with the EU.

¶ 15. (C) Kozulin believes that a meeting between him and President Bush or Secretary Rice before or after the elections would be a signal to Russia that the U.S. is willing to work with Russia to remove Lukashenko. [Note: Kozulin later recognized that a meeting with President Bush and Secretary Rice would probably not be possible.] Ambassador asked Kozulin why he has not asked to meet Putin if he is, after all, "Russia's Man," and asked why President Bush should meet Kozulin if Putin will not. Kozulin argued that Putin would meet with him only after he was able to first meet with President Bush.

¶ 16. (C) Kozulin then presented Ambassador a letter to pass to Secretary Rice, thanking the U.S. for its support for democratic freedom in Belarus. See para 14 for translation.

Kozulin's Future

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¶ 17. (C) Kozulin predicted that he would be arrested after the election and charged for his actions on February 17 at the National Press Center and March 2 at the Palace of Railroad workers. Until then, his goal is to keep the opposition's momentum going beyond the March 19 elections. He opined that during the President's March 3 speech at the Third All Belarusian People's Assembly, Lukashenko took off his "mask" and revealed to all Belarusians that he is a king with no clothes. Kozulin confirmed that Lukashenko's fall is inevitable and it is up to him to decide whether he wants to leave now and be remembered as Belarus' first President, or remain in power and be remembered as Europe's last dictator.

¶ 18. (C) Kozulin claimed that he was the future and would be supported by the nomenklatura, if only they were not so afraid. His open criticisms of the regime are what ordinary Belarusians discuss in their kitchens and asserted that Belarusians around the country recognize him as a candidate that will not tolerate oppression. "Once they [Belarusians] breathe free air, they like it, and once they drink clean water, they will never drink dirty water again."

Kozulin and Milinkevich to Work Together

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¶ 19. (C) Kozulin had presented Milinkevich three ways to collaborate: 1) They both rescind their candidacy, 2) decide who is the better suited candidate and the other bows out of the race, or 3) they both continue with their campaigns, and work together. On March 14, Milinkevich phoned Kozulin and agreed to the last option. Kozulin is okay with this and agreed to have their supporters congregate at local polling stations on March 19 and then march to the city's center.

Fears of Violence

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¶10. Kozulin fears the GOB will provoke the crowd and possibly arrange drastic measures, perhaps by arranging a killing of a police officer and blaming it on Kozulin. On a March 15, Kozulin campaign member Volchek presented Poloff GOB plans to violently use weapons, gas, and Special Forces to prevent any gatherings (septel). Kozulin told Ambassador that he and Milinkevich would videotape as much as possible should the demonstrations turn violent. Ambassador stressed to Kozulin that he and the GOB should avoid violence and any provocations. Kozulin claimed that Moscow would blame Lukashenko for any bloodshed.

¶11. (C) Kozulin asked Ambassador for the U.S. and EU to issue a joint statement before the elections that would condemn Lukashenko and his tactics. However, he believes it would be better if the EU and the U.S. could coordinate a statement with Russia.

Kozulin Was Fired for his Democratic Tendencies

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¶12. (C) Ambassador inquired about Kozulin's dismissal from the post of rector of BSU in 2003, which had been rumored to be due to his corruption. Kozulin said that he was the first rector of BSU democratically elected by most of the board members and not chosen by the President, which worried the GOB. Then after the 2001 presidential elections, the authorities discovered that 82 percent of BSU students voted against Lukashenko. According to Kozulin, at this point the GOB offered him a position as Belarus' permanent representative to the U.N., but since he did not speak much English and had not been to the U.S., the GOB was afraid that the U.S. could easily manipulate him. Then some problems arose with enterprises connected to the BSU and the GOB blamed Kozulin. However, unlike other GOB supporters at the time who were blamed for similar problems and then granted different posts, Kozulin was fired and not offered another position. Lukashenko then passed a decree that gave the President sole power in choosing and firing the rectors of BSU.

Comment

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¶13. (C) Kozulin's central message during his meeting with Ambassador was that he was the better opposition candidate because Russia supports his candidacy, and therefore, the U.S. and EU should openly back him if we wanted to see Lukashenko go. Although Kozulin claimed the GOB will use force to prevent the opposition from gathering, his and Milinkevich's supporters still plan to congregate. The recent wave of arrests and imprisonments of activists strongly suggest that any attempted large gatherings on Election Day will be met with stiff GOB resistance. End Comment.

¶14. (SBU) Begin unofficial translation of letter to Secretary Rice.

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To the Secretary of State of the United States of America

Ms. Condoleezza Rice

Dear Ms. Condoleezza Rice,

On behalf of myself and my companions, I would like to express to you my sincere gratitude for supporting my people's right to freedom and expression of democratic vote. I am heartily grateful to you for the principled stand in relation to the processes occurring in Belarus, and for your efforts of advocating and developing democracy in our country.

On March 2, the Belarusian authorities breached the laws, defied the Constitution, and lowered themselves to beating me, a presidential candidate, as well as my proxies and journalists. The first gunshots fired against the peaceful population were heard in Minsk.

I am convinced that due to your timely and influential voice on March 2, mass repressions and possibly assassinations of the citizens of my country were prevented.

I am hoping that your support in the future will be significant in terms of building a new free and democratic Republic of Belarus.

Presidential Candidate

A.V. Kozulin

March 14, 2006

End Translation.

Krol